

PIED POETRY

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To lure thy half-wit
(Having all, it moves nor¹-nor¹-nor¹ line)
Thy piety tears a writ --
A wash-out --
Writes moving word CANCEL on
The back of it,
And shall
Finger all!

"Modern poetry is most confusing," said Alice hesitantly. "How can piety tear a writ? And why should a half-wit be lured by the moving word cancel? It seems like a very ordinary word to me!" Poor Alice! Even professors of English and literary critics would have difficulty explaining this fragment. As one strains to catch some slight semblance of meaning behind the words, one is overcome by the same disoriented feeling that one has when looking out the window of a gently banking airplane -- what has happened to the horizon? Is there no longer a fixed point of reference, a unifying theme?

And yet ... and yet ... there is something oddly familiar about these words. Look -- it contains the words moving, finger and writes, which surely sounds familiar. And, yes -- there is piety nor wit, and tears wash out a word. It's nothing but a scrambled version of Edward Fitzgerald's famous quatrain from Omar Khayyam:

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on; nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.

But why? Why go to great lengths to translate hauntingly beautiful poetry into gibberish? Diffidently, we suggest one possible answer. Why should it not be possible to measure a poet's ability to select words germane to his message? The more skilfully he has selected his vocabulary to convey a given thought, the more difficult it should be to use these same words to convey any other idea. Of course, it is hard to put a precise measure on the value of the scrambled poem as compared with the original.

One may perhaps object to this method of critical analysis on the

grounds that it favors the poets of the eighteenth century over those of the twentieth; Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* expresses itself more clearly than Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, at least to the lay reader. Yet, Eliot comes through with flying colors, as the following fragment and its scramble suggest:

Upon the flannel beach I heard
A singing part to "Hair".
My mermaid's trousers have behind
The white each peach shall wear.
Each shall I walk to eat, and I ...
I shall dare!

Shall I part my hair behind? Shall I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

Is there any doubt in the reader's mind (even if he is unfamiliar with Eliot) which is the original?

Nor do earlier poets always have a clear advantage. Consider the following excerpt from *The Habit of Perfection*, written in the last half of the last century by Gerard Manley Hopkins, and compare it with its garble:

Hear me!
Silence!
Elected, I
Beat upon the whorled pipe.
Sing
To music
(And to me!)
And be my ear
To pastures that
Still care.

Elected Silence, sing to me
And beat upon my whorled ear,
Pipe me to pastures still and be
The music that I care to hear.

Although most readers will correctly identify the second version as the original, we think that the scramble gives it a good run for the money -- in this case, sense instead of dollars. Perhaps this helps explain why Hopkins is a much less well-known poet than either Fitzgerald or Eliot.

A second, more mundane, use for scrambled poetry is to test the reader's poetic knowledge. In fact, it was for this reason that the pied poems in this article were first constructed. Last year, Margaret Farrar approached the senior author to do a puzzle feature for the new magazine, *World*. The scrambled poetry idea was proposed to the editors of that magazine, but after mulling it over for several months they turned it down, probably because it was too esoteric for the readership.